

# A BRIEF HISTORY OF HAMPTON ROADS BASED GROCERY CHAINS

The Hampton Roads region of Virginia, as late as 1980, had four major grocery chains based in or with roots in the region: Colonial Stores (also known as Big Star); Giant Open Air; Bonnie Be-Lo Markets and Farm Fresh Food & Pharmacy. Today, Farm Fresh is the only surviving chain and with the early 2018 closings seeing that chain's footprint slashed dramatically, it appears that chain's future is far from secure.

## 1. COLONIAL STORES/BIG STAR

Colonial traced its official beginnings to the date of January 24, 1901; when David Pender, a native of Tarboro, NC and nephew of Confederate Major General William Dorsey Pender (killed in the Battle of Gettysburg)<sup>1</sup> who had moved to Norfolk, VA in the 1890s, incorporated the David Pender Grocery Company at the corner of Market Street and Monticello Avenue (a Google Maps search indicates this site is a now-vacant office building, across from MacArthur Center)<sup>2</sup> which he had started the previous year<sup>3</sup>. The store was successful (eventually expanding to include a delicatessen {well ahead of its time in that regard}; soda fountain and restaurant), allowing Pender to add a location on 619 Colley Avenue in Norfolk in 1919; the first of a series of new locations opening through Eastern and Central Virginia while also expanding to North Carolina. By 1926; the company went public, and with 244 stores by this time, Pender retired (though not for long,

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1 NCPedia page: "[Grocery Stores](#)" by Peter A. Coclanis with additional research by Sonya Elam, Gail B. Joyner and Wiley J. Williams (January 1, 2006; taken from "Encyclopedia of North Carolina" by William S. Powell; (c)2006 University of North Carolina Press)

2 Google Maps Search Result: [Monticello Avenue and Market Street, Norfolk, VA](#)

3 Groceteria.com article: "[Colonial Stores History by Wayne Henderson](#)"

going into grocery manufacturing and wholesaling), with National Food Products Corporation, a Boston-based company run by another grocery industry pioneer named Russell B. Stearns eventually acquiring the chain.

That company also owned the L.W. Rogers chain, started by its namesake in Atlanta in 1892 and following a similar path to Pender in its growth through Georgia and South Carolina. The chains under National Food continued having success even through the Great Depression, with over 400 Pender's stores and over 100 Rogers' locations by 1936. It was then that a series of significant changes in the business model began to take place.

The concept of "self-service stores" in the mid-1930s was still a relatively revolutionary concept in retail, having been introduced roughly 20 years earlier by Tennessee businessman Clarence Saunders, who received a patent for his self-serving store (in which the customer would pick up the items he or she would need directly as opposed to the then-standard procedure of having a clerk a list of items requested) from the U.S. Patent Office; with Saunders introducing the concept as part of a grocery chain he founded called "Piggly Wiggly"<sup>4</sup>. By 1937, National Food Company decided it was time to attempt their version, opening a pair of self-service stores that December in Greensboro, NC and Griffin, GA under the name "Big Star"; following up by opening Big Star locations on 1700 Monticello Avenue and 2002 Colley Avenue in Norfolk (the former eventually became a Tread Quarters Discount Tire with a Tire Choice Auto Service Center close by; the latter remained a Colonial until sometime in the late 1970s; the current status is unknown as of this edit)<sup>5</sup>. By 1940, the Pender-Rogers chains were combined into Colonial Stores, Incorporated; with headquarters in Atlanta. The regular stores retained the legacy "Pender" and "Rogers" names while the self-service stores expanded to 50 locations named either "Big Star" (for full-line stores) or "Little Star" with smaller locations.

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4 Piggly Wiggly page: [About Us](#)

5 Groceteria.com article: "[Tidewater/Hampton Roads Area Grocery Timeline](#)"

With World War II having concluded, by 1947 Colonial Stores began shifting its entire focus to self-service stores, which began using the corporate name (and newly-introduced "rooster" logo) in place of Big/Little Star; while the old-fashioned counter-service stores gradually began closing or converting to self-service, with the old format disappearing entirely by the mid-1950s (for example; the site of the original 1901 Pender's "grocery department store" would, by 1948, be the site of a new Colonial with rooftop parking, with that location surviving until around 1970). 1956 saw the chain open its largest store in the Old Dominion on First View Street in the Ocean View neighborhood of Norfolk – also with rooftop parking – per a spreadsheet on the location history, this location remained a Colonial until around 1975; with the building demolished in 1982<sup>6</sup>). By 1951; Colonial had grown to 376 stores in 6 states comprising the original Eastern division (based in Norfolk) and the newly-created Southern division based in Atlanta along with 3 large bakeries and sub-warehouses; including their first halting steps in Florida upon opening their first location in Tallahassee in 1949 (of four total; Colonial would later make a somewhat larger attempt in the Sunshine State during the 1970s by opening several stores in Jacksonville and mostly Central Florida {such as the Tampa-St. Petersburg, Clearwater and Orlando areas}).<sup>78</sup>

In 1955, Colonial acquired the Cincinnati-based Albers chain, started in 1933 and the owner of the oldest trademark for the term "super market", receiving all 66 locations in Ohio and Kentucky. Colonial also picked up the Indianapolis-based Stop **and** Shop Companies (notice "and" is spelled out. This chain is not to be confused with the Quincy, Massachusetts-based Stop & Shop chain that exists today), adding 14 more locations. The latter acquisition did not work out for Colonial, which sold all 14 of the Stop and Shop stores in 1959.

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6 Groceteria Spreadsheet: [Norfolk, VA Chain Grocery/Supermarket Locations \(1925-2015\)](#)

7 DigitalNC/North Carolina Newspapers page: "[Colonial One of Nation's Largest Food Concerns](#)" by Arnold Snow (The Daily Record {Dunn, NC}; January 24, 1951, pg. 3)

8 Groceteria Message Board Thread (March 31, 2021): [Colonial Stores in Florida](#) -Chain Supermarket History/History: USA Southeast (post by user pokemonprime)

Colonial then entered into licensing discount food stores in conjunction with discount chains during the early 1960s; among them leasing a Greenville, SC Kmart Foods (during the early years of the Kmart chain, there would be a Kmart Food store next to the main store that - while using the Kmart name - was essentially a local grocery store. This largely faded away by the early 1980s)<sup>9</sup> and by 1963 Colonial revived the "Big Star" name for one of four "no-frills" stores. In all, the 1960s proved a successful decade for the chain, with 430 stores in nine states by 1970.

By that decade, though, Colonial was facing increased competition in the discount grocery sector. A&P, though in the early stages of the decline that led to its eventual 2015 demise, was putting up a fight by implementing a warehouse format that became known as W.E.O. (for "Where Economy Originates" with its first location in Pennsauken, NJ in 1971. That location did well enough for A&P to expand the concept to 1500 stores; roughly a third of the 4000 stores A&P had in 1970, only for the fact that A&P's stores were largely much older {some buildings having been used dating to the 1930s} and smaller than their competition to derail the effort, leading to A&P throwing in the towel on that concept in 1975)<sup>10</sup>. Meanwhile, the chain - particularly the locations in the Carolinas - also faced competition in the low-price grocery market by the growing Salisbury-based Food Town chain as well as the "Big M" discount chain owned by Charlotte-based Harris Teeter<sup>11</sup>. By 1974; the Albers chain was sold while Big Star began increasingly supplanting the main Colonial brand as the primary trademark of the company. Locally, by the 1970s Colonial - in addition to fellow Norfolk-based chains such as Be-Lo, Giant Open Air and Farm Fresh - was facing competition from other chains such as the aforementioned A&P but also Philadelphia-based Food Fair (which first arrived in the area circa 1957) and more recently with the 1971 arrival of Safeway. For a time, Colonial also owned a drugstore chain named Galaxy Drug before selling that chain in 1970.<sup>12</sup>

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9 Wikipedia page: [Kmart#Former](#)

10Grocery page: [A&P History: The Meltdown](#)

11 Wikipedia page: [Harris Teeter#New ownership and 1980s expansion](#)

12DigitalNC/North Carolina Newspapers page: "[Colonial Stores Announces](#)

The beginning of the end occurred with the acquisition of the Colonial/Big Star outfit by the Grand Union chain in 1978 for a total of \$133 million (over \$536 million in 2020 dollars)<sup>13</sup>. Grand Union, owned at the time by Sir James Goldsmith, a British financier/corporate raider nicknamed "The Red Raider"; and had struggled for much of Goldsmith's ownership, and in the long run the acquisition - much like the 2007 acquisition of Pathmark by A&P - may have been a "back-breaker"; as following the Federal Trade Commission ordering Grand Union divest itself of its Southeast stores, resulting in the announcement of 30 Virginia and North Carolina stores being sold off or closed in early 1982<sup>14</sup> as part of the chain's unloading the original Norfolk division - including disposing of the corporate-owned bakery in Norfolk in April of that year as well as its Norfolk distribution center<sup>15</sup>; with many of those stores snapped up by the rapidly growing Food Lion chain (which Food Town had changed its name to in late 1982 as a result of wanting to avoid conflicts over the Food Town name in other markets in Virginia and elsewhere where the name was already in use) while the others resurfaced either as Be-Lo (for example; the Hertford, NC location would be one of four former Big Stars to reopen as Be-Lo; though speculation early on after the announcement of that location's closing ran the gamut of Byrd Food Store; Food World {the discount division of the Birmingham-based Bruno's chain; which was growing through the Southeast at the time}; Giant Open-Air (which acquired 6 former Big Stars in Eastern Virginia)<sup>16</sup>; Winn-Dixie; Kroger through its Sav-On format {this was a combined food-drug store format Kroger began using for a time in the late 1970s. It would not be until Kroger's acquisition of the Hannaford chain in 2000 that Kroger had any significant presence in the eastern half of Virginia, including the Hampton Roads region}; Elizabeth City-based S&R Supermarkets or Safeway

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a Stock Split, Increased Cash" (The Carolinian {Raleigh, NC}; February 19, 1972; pg. 17)

13 U.S. Inflation Calculator (accessed March 28, 2021)

14 United Press International Archives: "The Big Star supermarket chain is expected to announce..." (March 29, 1982)

15 Virginia Chronicle/Library of Virginia Page: "Big Star says farewell to Tidewater" (Suffolk News-Herald {Suffolk, VA}; February 27, 1983; pg. 6b)

16 United Press International Archives: "Officials of two Tidewater supermarket chains said Thursday they..." (April 22, 1982)

stores (the Safeway locations would then be closed in 1987 after Safeway – deep in debt after fending off a hostile takeover attempt by Dart Drug founder Herbert Haft and his son Robert and going private after Kohlberg Kravis Roberts acquired the chain as a white knight – merged the Richmond division {including the Hampton Roads stores; many of which eventually would be acquired by Farm Fresh} with their Washington, DC division; eventually selling off the Virginia stores over time as the debt-ridden chain slashed their footprint to the Western United States and Washington, D.C.) also being mentioned as possible contenders for that particular location)<sup>1718</sup>. The other stores in Virginia, North and South Carolina were shipped to Harris Teeter directly by 1988<sup>19</sup> as Grand Union was preparing to retreat to the Northeast (Harris Teeter would, in turn, sold many of the smaller or small-town locations to Piggly Wiggly) and the Atlanta division was sold to A&P in 1992 (when A&P - still sputtering after a brief period of restored prosperity in the 1980s - abandoned the South outside of New Orleans in the late 1990s; the Atlanta division stores eventually were acquired by Publix Super Markets; which had opened its first stores outside of its Florida base in 1991).

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17 DigitalNC/North Carolina Newspapers page: "[Big Star's closing will hurt business, county merchants say](#)" by Susan Harris (The Perquimans Weekly {Hertford, NC}; April 8, 1982; pg. 1)

18 Washington Post archive: "[Safeway Inc. Closing Distribution Center](#)" (April 13, 1987)

19 Wikipedia page: [Big Star Markets#History](#)

## 2. GIANT OPEN AIR MARKETS

Giant Open Air (not to be confused with either Giant-Landover or Giant-Carlisle, both Mid-Atlantic chains owned by Food Lion parent company Ahold Delhaize) first opened in 1939 in the Berkeley section of Norfolk at the foot of the Campostella Bridge (off State Route 168) by Wendall P. Ross & V.J. Mastracco<sup>20</sup>; with the original location supplanted by a store location in 1952 on Campostella Road<sup>21</sup>; with their stores being known for giant arches over the entrances. The chain's flagship location was a location opened in 1963 in the Ward's Corner section of Norfolk on Little Creek Road listed as being anywhere from 80,000 to 150,000 square feet - enormous for its time.<sup>22</sup>

That particular location was also noted for being open 24 hours a day (unheard of for the time) every day except Christmas; while - in a nod to its roots - in lieu of a front door, the entrance had an "air curtain" where a blower blew air down on the entering customer into a steel grate that recycled the air. Another notable distinctive features of that particular location included banquet rooms that could hold up to 1,000 guests, a 20 foot tall "waterfall" of ice in the seafood department and a balcony complete with a fountain. Other distinctives included large bakeries (also open 24/7; the first stores in the market with that distinction<sup>23</sup>); a 24-hour laundromat; a portico allowing groceries to be loaded into the customer's cars in case of rain and a large floral department – known as the "House of Flowers" - listed as

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<sup>20</sup>Wikipedia page: [Giant Open Air](#)

<sup>21</sup> Groceteria.com article: "[Tidewater/Hampton Roads Area Grocery Timeline](#)"

<sup>22</sup> Wards Corner Now article: [Historical photos of the Wards Corner Giant Open Air Market](#) (May 10, 2013)

<sup>23</sup> Washington Post article (September 10, 1979): "[From Juice to Jagerwurst, Stores in Tidewater Stock It](#)" by Steven B. Kaufman

one of the top 10 FTD stores in America at that point<sup>24</sup>. Additionally, Giant Open Air would receive national attention for its wide assortment of international offerings, ranging from Latin American items and Russian caviar to English teas and chocolate-covered ants from Japan, something the chain bragged about with signs boasting "Finest Foods of the World". Giant Open Air also owned the area's only grocery manufacturing and distribution center.

Of what is known to be available, the chain (reconnecting with the roots by renaming itself Open Air Markets in August 1985) eventually grew to 23 locations; along with 46 convenience stores known as "Tinee Giant" and LouSmith SuperMarkets, a small chain with 6 locations purchased that April while going public in late September 1985<sup>25</sup>. Less than a year later, however, the #1 chain in Hampton Roads - Farm Fresh - merged with Giant Open Air in a \$43 million deal announced in June 1986 and taking effect that September<sup>26,27</sup>, acquiring the entire operation; with the Giant Open Air name being retired by the end of 1987. However, shortly after the acquisition Farm Fresh became the target of a leveraged buyout by Citicorp Venture Capital completed in September 1988, resulting in Farm Fresh selling the Tinee Giant chain to its former CEO, Joseph Vita (Vita - the brother-in-law of the company chairman of the board Vincent Mastracco via Vita's marriage to Vincent's sister Theresa - having been Giant Open Air president at the time of the merger)<sup>28</sup>, and a number of the convenience stores still survive in the area.

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24 Virginian-Pilot archive: "[June 1963: A Giant Open Air market in Norfolk](#)" by Jakon Hays (June 3, 2018)

25 Washington Post article (September 30, 1985): "[Washington Investing](#)"

26 Virginia Chronicle/Library of Virginia Page: "[Big market share in grocery store merger](#)" (Suffolk News-Herald {Suffolk, VA}; June 4, 1986; pg. 5)

27 Virginia Chronicle/Library of Virginia Page: "[Farm Fresh/Open Air merger approved](#)" (Suffolk News-Herald {Suffolk, VA}; September 28, 1986; pg. 5)

28 Newport News Daily Press article (March 10, 1989): "[Ticker \(Vita Buys Tiny Giant\)](#)"

### **3. BONNIE BE-LO FOODS/BE-LO FOOD STORES/FRESH PRIDE/CAMELLIA FOODS**

This chain appears to be the hardest to find information on. From what is available, Camellia Foods (which was the parent company of Be-Lo/Fresh Pride along with two other chains called Meatland and FoodCity {unrelated to the Food City - note space - chain with locations in Virginia, Kentucky and Tennessee}) began in 1938 as a wholesale co-op and distributor<sup>29</sup>, with the Bonnie Be-Lo brand being introduced in 1948 with a location on Little Creek Road, adding stores under that label along with Meatland and FoodCity along with Earle's SuperMarkets and Star Food Markets as the chain expanded through the Hampton Roads region into northeastern North Carolina and the Eastern Shore of Virginia, advancing as far north as Maryland and Delaware at its peak. As late as 1983; Be-Lo still offered S&H Green Stamps even as trading stamps had largely faded from prominence during the 1970s<sup>30</sup>.

However, the late 1980s saw the Camellia-owned chains (Camellia purchased Meatland and FoodCity in 1989; adding Be-Lo in 1990) battered by increased competition, particularly from fellow Norfolk-based chain Farm Fresh as well as fast-growing Food Lion as those chains battled for market supremacy. The 1990s brought a series of body blows to the chain. In February 1991, the United Food and Commercial Workers Union, Local 400, began demanding union recognition, with Be-Lo declining and an election to resolve the issue set for March 21, 1991. The union lost the vote 377-220, with the remaining 159 voters either

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29 Food World/Food Trade News article (July 2014): "[Independent Retailers Farmer's Foods, Camellia Shutter Operations](#)"

30 Be-Lo Food Stores commercial taken from October 4, 1983 edition of WAVY-TV 10's "The Daily News" 6:00 p.m. newscast

not voting or having their ballots contested; resulting in pickets at several locations, to which Be-Lo sought and received 5 injunctions to remove the picketers under their no-solicitation policy, with the case dragging on until 1997 before being granted a partial victory by the U.S. 4th Circuit Court of Appeals, reversing an order by the National Labor Relations Board in the union's favor<sup>31</sup>.

Concurrent with this, Be-Lo also faced a boycott drive from a group called Ministers and Concerned Citizens of Tidewater accusing the chain of running dirty stores (mostly in black neighborhoods) that sold spoiled food – with Rev. Rudolph Smith, the leader of the community group, later alleging an attempted bribe on the part of Be-Lo to get him to call off the protests<sup>32</sup>. Be-Lo countered with a series of radio ads featuring a "spokes-hick" named Rita Bodine (portrayed by Rita Bentley, a personality working at the time for Top 40 station WRVQ-FM 94.5 in Richmond who also wrote the spots), with the character responding to the latter accusation by humorously stating the chain's meat freezers and displays cases were "cleaner than her refrigerator was when it was new"<sup>33</sup>; while the chain accused the union of being responsible for the boycott effort.

But nothing compared to the events of June 6, 1993. That night, the location in Windsor, NC - having closed early in preparation for the floors being stripped<sup>34</sup> - was the site of one of North Carolina's longest unsolved murders when an unidentified man entered the store, bound the six employees before killing three of the employees and seriously wounding two others (Jasper Hardy Jr.; the only person not wounded, according to Bertie County Sheriff Wallace Perry, was on the bottom of a stack)<sup>35</sup>.

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31 FindLaw Case Law Filing: [Be-Lo Stores v. 400 AFL-CIO CLC](#) (September 16, 1997)

32 Newport News Daily Press Article (May 30, 1991): "[Organizer of Be-Lo Protest Claims He Was Offered Bribe](#)" by Jeffrey Loudy

33 Newport News Daily Press Article (June 13, 1991): "[Be-Lo Radio Ads Bite Union Back](#)" by Jeffrey Loudy

34 WCTI-TV 12 Archive (June 17, 2013): "[Be-Lo Killer Remains Unidentified](#)" by Michael Hennessy

35 Associated Press Archive: "[Gunman Kills Three, Wounds Two in Small-Town Grocery Slaying](#)" by Estes Thompson (June 7, 1993)

These events, combined with the increasing competition from Food Lion, Farm Fresh and to a lesser degree Winn-Dixie among others, proceeded to put parent company Camellia on the ropes as the 1990s progressed. By 1995, Camellia had left the wholesale business via a "strategic alliance" with Richfood Holdings<sup>36</sup> and with its continued struggles eventually filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in 2001, citing a number of debts - including to its largest creditor Richfood (which had been acquired by SuperValu in 1999); though not before the owner of the small Richmond Community Pride chain (appealing primarily to inner-city customers), Jonathan Johnson, attempted to purchase the chain (Johnson later sued SuperValu in 2004 for \$25 million on grounds that the supplier sabotaged his efforts to buy Camellia and ultimately forced him out of business. In 2007, a Richmond circuit court jury awarded Johnson a reduced award of \$16 million<sup>37</sup>; though a 2008 appeal to the Virginia Supreme Court led to Johnson's monetary award reduced further to \$327,000<sup>38</sup>). When the chain emerged from bankruptcy 18 months later, the Meatland, FoodCity and Be-Lo names were largely retired in favor of the Fresh Pride name.

However, the Harrell and Saunders families that led the ownership group failed to invest in the chain, which along with increased competition (in addition to Food Lion and Farm Fresh; Fresh Pride also now had to compete with higher-end chains such as Harris Teeter and the increasingly prevalent Wal-Mart Supercenters) continued to gradually wither away until 2014, when the chain; which dropped to single digits in terms of store locations at the beginning of that year and exited the Eastern Shore of Virginia – where 4 stores could once be found - in its entirety that May when the Exmore location was shuttered<sup>39</sup>, quietly and rather abruptly folded by that July, leaving

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36 Food-a-rama page: [Richfood Timeline](#)

37 Virginian-Pilot Archive (June 8, 2007): "[Farm Fresh parent hit with \\$16 million judgment](#)"

38 FindLaw Case Law Filing: [SuperValu v. Jonathan F. Johnson](#) (September 12, 2008)

39 Delmarva Now Archive (May 21, 2014): "[Exmore Fresh Pride closing; Chincoteague store in limbo](#)"

some areas as what are known as “food deserts” with no grocery options nearby, particularly in poorer areas with large minority or elderly populations<sup>40</sup>.

#### 4. FARM FRESH FOOD & PHARMACY

Turning to the survivor; albeit again one which has shrunk dramatically in recent years. Farm Fresh began in 1957, with the name being selected as part of a contest by founder David Furman – who founded the chain with his brother Morris<sup>41</sup> as an open-air fruit stand at the corner of Military Highway and Norview Avenue in Norfolk. The chain would have 3 stores until 1966; when in arguably the major turning point for the chain, the small chain hired Indiana-based Kroger zone manager Gene Walters, who went on to become a high-ranking executive in the company along with serving as the face of the company during the 1970s and 1980s – appearing in numerous advertisements (reminding customers to “tell a friend”) and even providing the namesake of the store's “Farmer Gene” mascot. Meanwhile, the chain rapidly grew from 3 stores to 40 locations; with the Arrowhead Plaza location on Kempsville Road in Virginia Beach being its first store built from the ground up, while four years later Lynnhaven Parkway in the same city was the site of the first superstore location. The chain would find themselves doing over \$400 million in business by 1983, the year the chain went public. Additionally, in-store one-stop shopping sections such as pharmacies and florists were added<sup>42</sup>.

After years of growth through expansion, the chain, the most

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40 Virginian-Pilot Archive (July 5, 2014): “[For some, Fresh Pride was only close grocery option](#)”

41 Virginian-Pilot Archive (June 13, 2014): “[David Furman, co-founded Farm Fresh in 1950s, dies](#)” by Carolyn Shapiro

42 Eugene Walters/Just another WordPress.com weblog (November 10, 2009): “[Remembering Gene](#)” by Barbara Walters-Doehrman

successful chain in the region, then proceeded to seek expansion by acquisition; succeeding in the 1986 acquisition of fellow Hampton Roads based chain Giant Open Air, retiring that name while retaining the Tinee Giant convenience stores and replacing Farmer Gene with the Giant rainbow in the company's logo. Around this time, Farm Fresh would also introduce a group of short-lived off-shoots; such as Nick's (ranging from around 4,000-20,000 square feet; Nick's Discount Market – a Hampton grocery store Farm Fresh purchased in 1988 – would see that name adopted for many of the smaller Farm Fresh stores)<sup>43</sup>, Food Carnival (whose locations averaged roughly 70,000 square feet), Earle's Supermarkets (another independent outfit that Farm Fresh acquired in 1989 and used as another brand for the smaller stores<sup>44</sup>), Park Place Supermarkets (which upon its acquisition was folded into the Nick's chain)<sup>45</sup> and The Grocery Store warehouse format chain. Later still, Farm Fresh would launch a high-end store simply titled “The Market”, featuring – among other amenities – having a chef daily preparing hot meals and specials (that format lasted until 2011).

Turbulence, however, was beginning to set in. In 1987; Farm Fresh approached GF Investments Two, a shareholder group that included Alex Grass, CEO of Rite Aid, about a possible negotiated acquisition<sup>46</sup>; ultimately undertaking a leveraged buyout by management. Also, in a stunning move Gene Walters had been surprisingly let go by the chain after being diagnosed with colon cancer (upon his recovery, Walters then started a separate chain called Gene Walters' MarketPlace); only to be brought back to Farm Fresh's board of directors by 1989 (by 1992; Farm Fresh would buy half of the Gene Walters locations; with the rest scattered among four other companies).

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43 Newport News Daily Press article (January 10, 1989): “Farm Fresh Spreads Name of Nick's to Smaller Store”

44 Newport News Daily Press article (June 14, 1989): “[Farm Fresh Plans to Buy Out Earle's](#)”

45 Southside Sentinel (Urbanna, VA) (September 21, 1989): “[Farm Fresh purchases Park Place](#)” by Larry S. Chowning (pg. 1-2)

46 New York Times article (December 30, 1987): “[COMPANY NEWS; Farm Fresh Holds Acquisition Talks](#)”

The chain was also facing intense competition for the lead in the Hampton Roads region's grocery dollars by Food Lion; with the chain also hampered by the debt incurred by the LBO, selling off the Tinee Giant convenience stores and (with the chain also dealing with customers seeking more inexpensive shopping options following the early 1990s recession) later unloading the Nick's chain<sup>47</sup> (eventually sold to a firm known as Virginia Supermarkets, started by former Farm Fresh executive Keith Alessi and becoming part of the IGA co-operative chain<sup>48</sup>) while the company – which had gotten overextended following the acquisition of the Giant Open Air chain as well as buying many of the locations when Safeway pulled out of Hampton Roads following a hostile takeover attempt - landed in debt following the buyout by Mike Julian in 1988, eventually leading the chain to seek junk-bond financing by 1992<sup>49</sup> while also abandoning its co-sponsorship of the LPGA Tour's Crestar-Farm Fresh Classic, which it had co-sponsored with Crestar Bank since 1990 and which was played at three different Tidewater golf courses between 1979-92, the last of which was the Greenbrier Country Club<sup>50</sup> (the event's other co-sponsor, Richmond-based Crestar Bank, would survive until its acquisition by SunTrust in 1998; with its remnants owned by Truist Financial after SunTrust's 2019 merger with BB&T), before that event was dropped altogether after 1992. By 1992, Farm Fresh and Food Lion were neck and neck for the lead in Hampton Roads for the top grocery chain, with Farm Fresh's share of the market dropping over 5% compared to 1991 vs. Food Lion's share increasing by about 2%<sup>51</sup>. While Farm Fresh widened its market lead in 1993; much of that owed to Food Lion (which had recently expanded into the highly competitive market of the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex) being wounded by

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47 Southside Sentinel (Urbanna, VA) (December 12, 1991): "[Farm Fresh to Sell Nick's Market Chain](#)" (pg. 10)

48 Newport News Daily Press article (January 14, 1992): "[Farm Fresh Exec to Buy 14 Nick's](#)"

49 Newport News Daily Press Article (August 30, 1992): "Junk-Bond Financing on Way to Farm Fresh"

50 Virginia Chronicle/Library of Virginia Page: "[Crestar, Farm Fresh abandon LPGA tourney at Greenbrier Country Club](#)" (Suffolk News-Herald {Suffolk, VA}; August 29, 1992; pg. 3)

51 Newport News Daily Press Article (June 21, 1992): "[A Rip-Roaring Grocery Battle](#)"

a 1992 ABC PrimeTime Live report accusing them of bleaching and reselling spoiled meats. In 1993, the chain shifted the Food Carnival stores into a no-frills warehouse format called "Rack and Sack" (averaging around 81,000 sq. ft., double the standard 40,000 sq. ft. Farm Fresh)<sup>52</sup>.

Also, in November 1993; Farm Fresh announced the acquisition of 15 Safeway stores (as part of Safeway completing its plans to exit Richmond; with the Washington, D.C locations becoming the chain's lone Eastern market after a 1986 acquisition by Kohlberg Kravis Roberts {following an attempted hostile takeover by father-and-son Herbert and Robert Haft of the D.C.-based Dart Group} that saw Safeway taken private and sell off most of their non-Western divisions to pay off a significant amount of debt}) that were run for a time as part of Farm Fresh's "The Grocery Store" chain.<sup>53</sup>

However, by the mid-1990s Farm Fresh would have more than just Food Lion to watch for; with an increasing footprint by Jacksonville, FL-based Winn-Dixie; Richmond-based Ukrop's entering Tidewater; and most significantly the increasing effort of non-grocery chains such as Kmart (with their Super Kmart format) and especially Wal-Mart (which had launched the SuperCenter format in 1988; with that increasingly becoming the chain's primary format)<sup>54</sup>; with Maine-based Hannaford and Charlotte-based Harris-Teeter announcing plans to enter the market in 1995<sup>55</sup>. Farm Fresh would also sell eight of their stores in "The Grocery Store" chain (7 in Richmond) to Hannaford (those Richmond stores having been bought from Safeway in 1993)<sup>56</sup>, with the capital raised being used

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52 Newport News Daily Press Article (February 3, 1993): "[No Frills: Less At This Grocery Store Might Be More](#)"

53 Newport News Daily Press Article (November 20, 1993): "[Farm Fresh to Buy 15 Safeway's](#)"

54 Newport News Daily Press Article (June 26, 1994): "Discount Stores Join Grocery Competitors"

55 Newport News Daily Press Article (June 11, 1995): "[Farm Fresh Licks Opposition](#)"

56 Newport News Daily Press Article (July 21, 1995): "[Farm Fresh Selling 8 Outlets](#)"

to make improvements in the home base.

However, by 1996 Food Lion began closing in once again as Farm Fresh continued struggling due to its continued debt problems and competition from Food Lion and other chains, including the forays from non-traditional grocery stores such as the aforementioned Wal-Mart SuperCenters. Later that year, Food Lion overtook Farm Fresh as the Hampton Roads market leader, the first time the hometown chain was dethroned for that top position in over a decade<sup>57</sup>. Worse yet, Farm Fresh found themselves forced in late 1996 to seek aid from Donaldson, Lufkin & Jenrette Securities Corporation, a New York investment firm. This led to rumors that Richfood Holdings, a wholesale distributor based in Richmond, was considering purchasing the chain even though they also served as a supplier for Ukrop's<sup>58</sup>, a sale that would be finalized in late 1997<sup>59</sup>. Just two years later, Richfood was acquired by Minnesota-based SuperValu in 1999 – allowing SuperValu to take control of Farm Fresh along with Shoppers Food and Pharmacy, a chain primarily centered in Washington, D.C., the surrounding areas and Baltimore<sup>60</sup> (the latter chain having just been acquired from the remnants of Herbert Haft's "Dart Group"; which in addition to Shoppers also owned Dart Drug, Crown Books and Trak Auto. That company, which had embarked on a series of unsuccessful takeover attempts {including the attempted Safeway takeover mentioned above} during the buyout-crazed 1980s, was rapidly imploding due to a nasty family feud following the elder Haft filing for divorce from his wife Gloria and firing eldest son Robert in 1993; with the feud resolving itself in 1997 when Herbert – after a series of lawsuits – left the business)<sup>61</sup>. The purchase would mark the

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57 Newport News Daily Press Article (September 20, 1999): "Then and Now: A Glimpse Into Local Recent History"

58 Newport News Daily Press Article (December 8, 1996): "[Fast Fade for Farm Fresh?](#)"

59 Newport News Daily Press Article (September 10, 1997): "[Richfood Takes Over Farm Fresh](#)"

60 Baltimore Sun Article (September 1, 1999): "[Richfood now owned by Supervalu; Metro markets' owner fetches \\$1.5 billion as deal is completed; Grocery industry](#)" by Lorraine Mirabella

61 Washington Post Article (September 3, 2004): "[Discount Retailing](#)

first time Farm Fresh was owned by a company outside of its home base of Virginia.

The 2000s was largely a quiet decade for Farm Fresh (with the biggest story involving the chain being the death of longtime executive Gene Walters on November 4, 2009)<sup>62</sup>; but during the 2010s the turmoil that had plagued Farm Fresh during the 1990s returned with a vengeance. The first domino fell in early 2010 with the retirement of Farm Fresh president Ron Dennis<sup>63</sup>, who came to the company following the Richfood acquisition and under his watch saw the chain narrow the gap with Food Lion while opening their first location in downtown Norfolk (named "The Market at Harbor Heights") in 2007 while having, three years earlier, shepherded the chain's return to North Carolina when Farm Fresh moved into part of a vacant Kmart (shared with Big Lots) in Elizabeth City when Kmart filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in 2003 (Farm Fresh had previously occupied a location on Halstead Boulevard from 1983-96 that had previously housed a Mammoth Mart and King's Department Stores, following Farm Fresh's departure the location later became a Winn-Dixie and is currently a Roses {for a brief period in 2016-17 sharing space with Save-A-Lot, a discount grocery chain that had been owned by SuperValu until October 2016; when it was sold to private equity firm Onex Corporation}). By 2012 – when the Richfood name was retired in favor of My Essentials as a store brand for Farm Fresh; SuperValu's stock had dropped to \$5 a share vs. going for \$46 a share in 2007.<sup>64</sup>

Following Dennis' retirement; the top position at the chain became a revolving door. First, SuperValu vice-president of retail operations support Gaelo de la Fuente was appointed in 2010 as Dennis' successor as the chain's president; staying for two years before leaving to pursue other interests in 2012. Farm Fresh senior vice-

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[Giant Stoked Bitter Family Feud](#)" by Patricia Sullivan

62 Virginian-Pilot Article (November 5, 2009): "[Gene Walters, longtime grocery executive, dies at 86](#)"

63 Virginian-Pilot archive: "[Farm Fresh president Ron Dennis to retire Friday](#)" by Carolyn Shapiro (March 2, 2010)

64 BrandlandUSA article: "[Richfood Going Bye-Bye](#)" by Garland Pollard (May 20, 2012)

president of merchandising Bill Parker was named interim president four days after de la Fuente's departure; officially assuming the company presidency on March 4, 2013 only to leave shortly afterwards for the same reasons. Soon after, Micky Nye – vice-president of sister chain Shoppers Food & Pharmacy – became the first woman to hold the top job at the chain<sup>65</sup>. However, SuperValu would soon transfer much of the senior management, including Nye and company vice-president Marc “Theo” Theophelakes, elsewhere – either to a newly-created secondary firm called “Retail East” or to SuperValu headquarters in Eden Prairie, MN (just outside of the Twin Cities)<sup>66</sup>.

But then the bottom fell out when, on March 14, 2018, SuperValu made the announcement that 21 of the 38 locations were being sold to rival companies in exchange for \$43 million in a deal that would finalize on May 4. 17 of those were sold to The Kroger Company, which reopened most of the stores under the Kroger or Harris-Teeter brands (Kroger having purchased Harris-Teeter in 2014, though some – most notably the one-time Farm Fresh location on the corner of Wards Corner and Little Creek Road {which was the former Giant Open Air flagship Farm Fresh inherited with the acquisition of the former chain} – ended up closing despite Kroger initially announcing it would move from its previous location on Little Creek Road {that location being one of the first Krogers in the Hampton Roads region after Kroger acquired 20 former Hannaford stores when that chain exited the market in 2000} to the former Farm Fresh location, with Kroger deciding to close their own Little Creek Road location instead<sup>67</sup>); with the remainder – including the lone North Carolina location – going to Ahold Delhaize; the parent company of Food Lion. Of the remaining 17, 11 ended up closing outright while of the other 6, two locations in Newport News and Virginia Beach were sold to an independent grocer named Chris Lee; three other Hampton Roads locations remained open as SuperValu continued to search for a buyer and the location in the Shockoe Bottom section of Richmond was sold to Charlottesville-based Neighborhood Grocery Holdings LLC; with

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65Virginian-Pilot archive: [“Farm Fresh Gets Another New President”](#) by Carolyn Shapiro (September 14, 2013)

66Wikipedia page: [Farm Fresh Food & Pharmacy#Financial troubles and SuperValu acquisition](#)

67WTKR-TV 3 Archive: [“Kroger closing Wards Corner Norfolk location, going against original plans”](#) by Nick Boykin (October 18, 2018)

the Newport News, Virginia Beach and Richmond locations keeping the Farm Fresh name – with Lee emphasizing the employees would be retained and even pledging to keep the chain's popular fried chicken; while Neighborhood Grocery Holdings announced upon their purchase of the Richmond location that they would retain SuperValu (which was incidentally sold to Providence, RI-based United Natural Foods in July 2018 as part of SuperValu gradually ending its retail operations {in addition to selling off Farm Fresh; in March 2019 it was announced that Washington-based Shoppers Food & Pharmacy was officially put up for sale, with all stores in the chain expected to be sold off by 2022}<sup>6869</sup>) as a supplier. In late 2019, it was announced that the Norge location would close due to increased competition, dropping the number of surviving Farm Fresh stores to four<sup>70</sup>; followed by the closing of the Virginia Beach location on March 6, 2020 to bring the total number of Farm Fresh locations as of the end of 2020 to three: one each in Richmond, Newport News and Portsmouth<sup>71</sup>; though in late 2021 the location covering Poquoson near the Virginia Peninsula reopened in 2022 under new management.<sup>72</sup> However; on January 10, 2024 it was announced that the Poquoson location would close once again, citing in a press release that location never reached the volume needed to remain profitable.<sup>73</sup>

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68 Baltimore Sun Article (March 25, 2019): ["Parent company of Shoppers plans sale of D.C.-Baltimore grocery chain"](#)

69Wikipedia page: [Shoppers Food & Pharmacy#History](#)

70 Williamsburg Yorktown Daily Article (September 19, 2019): ["Norge Farm Fresh announces closure about a year after purchase"](#)

71WAVY-TV 10 Archive: ["Last Farm Fresh in Virginia Beach to close, leaving only one store on the Southside"](#) by Sarah Fearing and Brett Hall (February 25, 2020)

72 Williamsburg Yorktown Daily Article (November 16, 2021): ["Poquoson Farm Fresh to Reopen Under New Ownership in 2022"](#)

73WTKR-TV 3 Article: ["Poquoson Farm Fresh grocery store is closing this winter"](#) by Sammi Blitz (January 10, 2024)